

The Elizabethan Age

William Shakespeare was born in 1564 during the Reign of Queen Elizabeth I. Elizabeth I became Queen of England in 1558 and ruled until her death in 1603. We call the time of her reign the Elizabethan Age.

The country she inherited from her sister, Mary, was poor and without real leaders. The English people were divided by the disputes between Catholics and Protestants. England had been made poor by foreign wars.

Elizabeth was only a young woman when she came to the throne but she was proud and clever. She set about restoring peace at home. She encouraged the building and manning of ships to defend England in case of attack by foreign powers. Under Elizabeth's rule England prospered.

Peace at home meant that people could work in peace, confident that they would be able to enjoy the rewards of their labour. Farmers and trades people of every kind flourished. People built bigger and better houses. People generally ate well and dressed well.

Elizabeth loved music, dancing and theatre and encouraged art and learning generally. She was intelligent and well educated. She liked witty, intelligent, educated people about her.

It was into this world of peace and plenty that William Shakespeare was born in 1564 and his talents were able to develop.

In 1588 Elizabeth's navy defeated the great Spanish Armada sent by Philip of Spain to conquer England.

Her sea captains - Raleigh, Hawkins, Drake and Frobisher made voyages of discovery around the world. They brought back treasure and began the process of colonising the newly found lands of America.



Queen Elizabeth I

Questions

1. When did Elizabeth I become Queen of England?
2. How long was Elizabeth Queen of England?
3. What did Elizabeth do to make sure England could defend herself from foreign attacks?
4. How did peace at home help the ordinary people of England?
5. Why did Elizabeth encourage art and learning?
6. When was William Shakespeare born?
7. How did Elizabeth's sea captains help her?
8. Write a description of Queen Elizabeth I from the picture opposite.

Shakespeare's Home and Family

William Shakespeare was born in April 1564 at Stratford-on-Avon in England. His father, John, was a glove-maker and general trader who owned his own business. His mother, Mary, was the daughter of a rich local farmer, Robert Arden.

They lived in a large house with a garden in Henley Street. John Shakespeare's business was also run from this house. The house in Henley Street where William Shakespeare was born still exists. Every year thousands of tourists from all over the world visit the house.

John Shakespeare came from a farming family just outside Stratford. He moved to Stratford as a young man and became a successful businessman. By 1556 he owned several properties in Stratford-on-Avon. In 1558 he was elected a constable and in 1568 he was elected bailiff or mayor of Stratford.

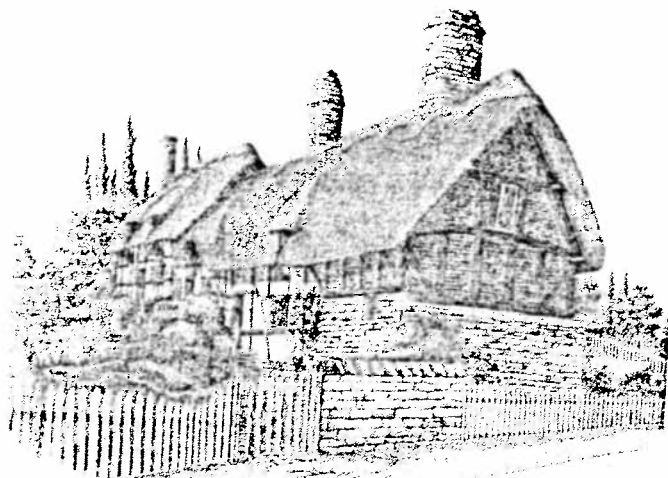
John Shakespeare married Mary Arden in 1557. William was their third child. Two older sisters had both died as infants but William survived in spite of an outbreak of the plague that year. William was followed by three brothers - Gilbert, Richard and Edmund - and two sisters - Joan and Anne.

William went to the local Grammar school until he was about fourteen. He probably left to help run his father's business. When he was eighteen he married Anne Hathaway, a local farmer's daughter. They had a daughter Susanna and then twins, Hamnet and Judith.

Later, probably sometime in 1587, William left Stratford to go to London.

Questions

1. When and where was William Shakespeare born?
2. Who was William Shakespeare's father?
3. What was his father's trade?
4. How many brothers and sisters did William have?
5. Who did William Shakespeare marry?



Anne Hathaway's Cottage near Stratford-on-Avon

The house on the left is known as Anne Hathaway's cottage. It belonged to the family of Anne Hathaway who married William Shakespeare in 1582.

The house, just outside Stratford-on-Avon, can still be seen today.

Write a description of Anne Hathaway's cottage from the picture on the left.

The Globe

The Globe theatre was built in Bankside in 1599. Here many of Shakespeare's plays were performed for the first time. Shakespeare not only wrote for the company but often took small parts in the plays.

The Globe was roughly circular in shape. Inside there were three tiers of galleries covered by a thatched roof. The roof did not cover the whole theatre. The pit or yard in the middle of the theatre was open to the sky.

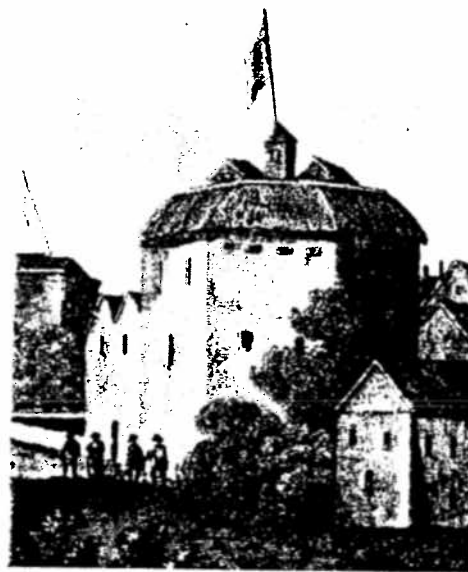
The stage was a wooden platform raised a few feet from the ground. It projected out into the pit and could be seen from all sides.

Behind the stage was an inner room masked by curtains. Above it was a gallery which could be used either by musicians or for scenes like the famous balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*.

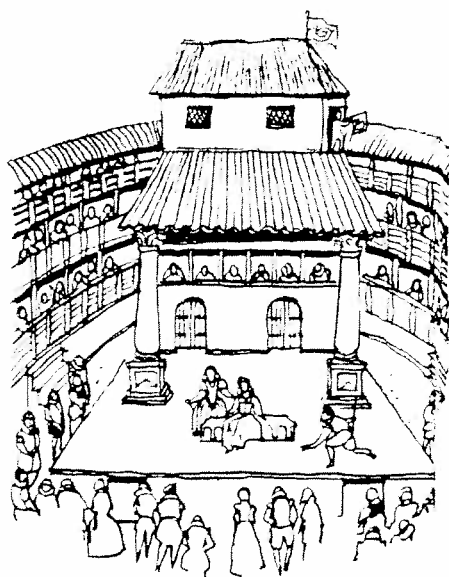
Behind the stage was the tiring house - the changing rooms - where actors got ready for their parts. There was a roof over the stage area and a trapdoor in the floor of the stage. Some scenery was used and the trapdoors above and below the stage might be used for special effects.

The people who stood in the pit or yard to watch the play were called groundlings. People who sat in the galleries, probably on wooden benches, paid more.

Plays were performed in daylight, in the afternoon, in the summer months. Bad weather might prevent a performance so a flag would be hoisted to let people know that a performance was going to take place.



The Globe Theatre taken from
Visscher's View of London 1616



An artist's impression of the stage
of the Swan Theatre

Questions

1. When was the Globe theatre built?
2. Why is the Globe theatre famous?
3. Why did the groundlings get wet if it rained?
4. Why did it cost more to go in the galleries?
5. What was the gallery above the stage used for?
6. What was the tiring house used for?
7. What was the signal flag used for?

Extended Writing

Write about any play that you have seen. It may have been on a school stage or in a theatre. Write about the way the play was staged - the scenery, costumes, special effects, etc.

Special Effects

Thunder and lightning, witches and warlocks, ghosts and apparitions, bags of blood and guts - Elizabethan audiences loved them and Shakespeare gave them what they wanted.

From *Titus Andronicus* to *Macbeth*, Shakespeare's tragedies are awash with blood and littered with dead bodies. Actors used bladders of pigs blood which they burst when they had been stabbed. Animal entrails were used for disembowelings, and artificial severed heads were part of the props kept by the companies of players.

People in Shakespeare's time were used to such sights in real life. Public executions were always well attended and the heads of traitors were left to rot on stakes on London Bridge as a warning to others.

Ghosts appear in many Shakespeare plays. In one scene from *Macbeth* the three witches conjure up Hecate, three apparitions, the ghost of Banquo and a procession of kings. These apparitions probably came up through the trapdoor in the floor of the stage where the witches' cauldron was.

Sometimes the trapdoor in 'the Heavens' above the stage was used to fly down characters. In *Cymbeline* "Jupiter descends in thunder and lightning, sitting upon an eagle." The sound of thunder was made by rolling a cannon ball across the floor of the hut up in 'the Heavens'. Fireworks were also used.

A cannon, kept up in the hut above 'the heavens', was also used in plays like *Henry V*, *Othello* and *Hamlet*. It was shot off during battle scenes or as salutes. In June 1613 the cannon at the old Globe playhouse was fired during a production of *Henry VIII*. It set fire to the thatched roof and the theatre was burnt to the ground.

Questions

1. What did Elizabethan actors use to show they had been stabbed?
2. Why weren't Elizabethan audiences horrified by the violence in Shakespeare's tragedies?
3. Why was the trapdoor in the stage floor particularly useful for the staging of *Macbeth*?
4. What was the trapdoor in 'the Heavens' used for?
5. How was thunder made?
6. What caused the fire that burnt down the old Globe playhouse in 1613?



The head of Macbeth held aloft after his defeat at the end of the play



The three witches with Hecate from *Macbeth*

Romeo and Juliet



BACKGROUND INFO

AUTHOR BIO

Full Name: William Shakespeare

Date of Birth: 1564

Place of Birth: Stratford-upon-Avon, England

Date of Death: 1616

Brief Life Story: Shakespeare's father was a glove-maker, and Shakespeare received no more than a grammar school education. He married Anne Hathaway in 1582, but left his family behind around 1590 and moved to London, where he became an actor and playwright. He was an immediate success: Shakespeare soon became the most popular playwright of the day as well as a part-owner of the Globe Theater. His theater troupe was adopted by King James as the King's Men in 1603. Shakespeare retired as a rich and prominent man to Stratford-upon-Avon in 1613, and died three years later.

KEY FACTS

Full Title: *The Most Excellent and Lamentable Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*

Genre: Tragic drama

Setting: The Italian cities of Verona and Mantua during the Renaissance (around the fourteenth century).

Climax: Romeo and Juliet's double suicide in the Capulet tomb.

Protagonists: Romeo and Juliet

Antagonists: There are many antagonists to Romeo and Juliet's love. The most important include the feud between the Capulets and Montagues; Tybalt; the Prince, citizens, and laws, of Verona; and fate.

HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT

When Written: early to mid 1590s

Where Written: England

When Published: 1597

Literary Period: The Renaissance (1500-1660)

Related Literary Works: As with many other of his plays, Shakespeare adapted his version of *Romeo and Juliet* from earlier sources. Shakespeare's most direct source was an English narrative poem published in 1562 by Arthur Brooke, which was itself based on a French version of an Italian story. Shakespeare's play and Brooke's poem share many similarities of plot, including how Romeo and Juliet met and died. However, while the plots are similar, Brooke's version is generally considered to be plodding, while Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is one of the most exciting plays ever written. Shakespeare transformed the story in a variety of ways. Three of the most important include cramming a plot that in Brooke's poem took nine months to unfold into just four frenetic days, having Tybalt kill Mercutio, and having Romeo and Juliet's wedding day occur on the same day that Romeo is banished. But just as important in creating the ecstatic intensity of *Romeo and Juliet* is the unparalleled power of Shakespeare's language. In addition to its similarity to earlier versions of the Romeo and Juliet story, Shakespeare's play is also similar to the story of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, which was best told by the Roman poet Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*. Shakespeare was not only aware of the similarity between the stories of Romeo and Juliet and Pyramus and Thisbe, he explicitly references *Pyramus and Thisbe* within *Romeo and Juliet*.

Historical Context: Unlike many of Shakespeare's other plays, *Romeo and Juliet* does not contain any real overt or even hidden references to the day and age in which Shakespeare lived.

EXTRA CREDIT

Shakespeare or Not? There are some who believe Shakespeare wasn't educated enough to write the plays attributed to him. The most common anti-Shakespeare theory is that Edward de Vere, the Earl of Oxford, wrote the plays and used Shakespeare as a front man because aristocrats were not supposed to write plays. Yet the evidence supporting Shakespeare's authorship far outweighs any evidence against. So until further notice, Shakespeare is still the most influential writer in the English language.



PLOT OVERVIEW

In Verona, Italy, during the Renaissance, two noble families, the Montagues and Capulets, are locked in a bitter feud. After a series of public brawls between both the nobles and the servants of the two families, **Prince Escalus**, the ruler of Verona, declares that anyone in either family involved in any future fighting will be put to death.

Every year the Capulets throw a masquerade ball. The Montagues, of course, are not invited. **Capulet** and **Lady Capulet** hope that this year their daughter **Juliet** will fall in love with **Paris** at the ball, since at thirteen she is almost of marriageable age and Paris would be a good match. But two Montagues, sixteen-year-old **Romeo** and his cousin **Benvolio**, along with their friend **Mercutio**, a kinsmen of Prince Escalus, crash the party. Romeo attends the party only because he wants to see **Rosaline**, a young woman he has been unsuccessfully pursuing for quite some time. That lack of success has made him noticeably lovelorn of late. But at first sight of Juliet, Romeo falls in love. Juliet is equally smitten. They speak, and kiss. As the party ends Romeo and Juliet separately discover that they belong to rival families, and are both distraught. Yet Romeo is already so in love that instead of leaving the Capulet's residence with his friends, he jumps a wall and hides beneath her balcony. Suddenly she emerges, and tells the night sky about her forbidden love for Romeo. Romeo jumps out from his hiding place. They exchange vows of love. The next day, with the help of **Friar Laurence** and Juliet's **Nurse**, Romeo and Juliet are secretly married.

That same day, Benvolio and Mercutio encounter **Tybalt**, who is Juliet's cousin. Tybalt is furious that the Montagues crashed the Capulet party (he spotted them). He has challenged Romeo to a duel. While Mercutio mocks Tybalt, Romeo himself shows up. Tybalt challenged him to fight. Romeo, who is now secretly Tybalt's kinsmen by marriage, refuses. Before Romeo can explain his reasons, Mercutio disgustedly steps in. Romeo tries to separate them, but Tybalt stabs and kills Mercutio under Romeo's arm. Mercutio dies cursing both Montagues and Capulets. In a rage, Romeo kills Tybalt.

Because Romeo at first tried to stop the fighting, instead of ordering him executed the Prince banishes him from Verona. Juliet is devastated when she learns that Romeo killed her cousin, but she decides that her loyalty must be with her husband. That night Romeo comes to her room and the lovers are able to spend one glorious night together before Romeo, at dawn, must flee Verona to Mantua.

The death of Tybalt affects Lord Capulet deeply. He decides to marry Juliet to Paris immediately. Juliet refuses. Capulet threatens to disown her. Lady Capulet sides with her husband, and even the Nurse advises Juliet to marry Paris and forget Romeo. Juliet rushes to Friar Laurence, who comes up with a plan: he gives her a potion that will make it seem like she's died but will really only put her to sleep. She will be laid to rest in the Capulet tomb, and there will wake up. Meanwhile, the Friar promises to get news to Romeo so that he'll secretly return from Mantua and be there when she wakes up. She follows the Friar's advice. The next morning the Capulet household wakes to discover Juliet has died. Instead of a wedding, they have a funeral. Juliet's body is put in the tomb.